

New York Times, February 27, 2009

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday passed a \$410 billion omnibus spending bill packed with pet projects requested by Democrats and Republicans alike.

The 245-to-178 vote came just a week after President Obama signed one of the largest spending bills in the nation's history, a \$787 billion measure meant to rejuvenate a sluggish economy.

The new bill, a reflection of Democratic priorities, increases spending on domestic programs by an average of 8 percent in the current fiscal year, which began in October.

On Thursday, Mr. Obama is scheduled to send his budget for the next fiscal year to Congress. He did not take a formal position on the bill passed by the House.

"It's a big document," a White House official said. "We are still reviewing it."

Republicans, however, did not mince words in describing the spending bill as wasteful. And one watchdog group said the bill provided nearly \$8 billion for more than 8,500 pet projects favored by lawmakers, including \$1.7 million for a honey bee laboratory in Weslaco, Tex.; \$346,000 for research on apple fire blight in Michigan and New York; and \$1.5 million for work on grapes and grape products, including wine.

Representative John Fleming, Republican of Louisiana, said Mr. Obama's call for fiscal responsibility, in a speech to a joint session of Congress on Tuesday, was "sandwiched between two wasteful spending bills."

Representative Mark Steven Kirk, Republican of Illinois, pointed out that the new bill came just

two days after the White House held a forum to promote fiscal restraint.

The legislation includes nine of the regular appropriations bills for this fiscal year. Unable to reach agreement with President George W. Bush last year, Congress provided most domestic agencies and programs with a short-term infusion of cash, which runs out at the end of next week.

Democratic leaders of the House and the Senate have already negotiated and agreed on the contents of the new legislation. But conservative Republican senators could try to amend the bill, to pare it down or delete earmarks. If they succeed, the bill would need to go back to the House before it could be presented to the president.

The bill increases budgets for the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation, among others.

Over all, it provides \$19 billion more than Mr. Bush requested for the same agencies and \$31 billion more than what they got in the last fiscal year.

Representative Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts, said the bill “turns the page once and for all on the last eight years.”

Democrats boasted that they had not included earmarks in the economic stimulus bill, but lawmakers of both parties relished the opportunity to stuff the new bill with pet projects.

Taxpayers for Common Sense, a watchdog group, counted more than 8,500 “Congressionally designated projects” in the bill and said the cost of these earmarks totaled \$7.7 billion., up 3.4 percent from last year.

Representative Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona, said it was unseemly for Congress to finance so many pet projects at a time when “the Justice Department is investigating the connection

between earmarks and campaign contributions.”

By a vote of 226 to 182, the House killed a proposal by Mr. Flake calling on the House ethics committee to investigate such connections.

Representative David R. Obey, the Wisconsin Democrat who is chairman of the Appropriations Committee, said earmarks were a small part of the bill and had been fully disclosed. Without the earmarks, he said, “the White House and its anonymous bureaucrats” would control all spending.

Moreover, Democrats said 40 percent of the spending on earmarks went to projects that had been requested by Republicans.

Representative Jerry Lewis of California, the senior Republican on the Appropriations Committee, said that to understand the magnitude of new federal spending, one must look at the money in the omnibus bill and the money for the same agencies in the economic stimulus law, which together total \$680 billion. That sum is 80 percent higher than spending for those agencies last year, he said.

A number of policy changes are included in the bill. It would, for example, make it easier for Americans to visit immediate relatives in Cuba. And it would forbid Mexican trucks to operate outside certain commercial zones along the border with the United States. The Teamsters union, which supported Mr. Obama’s election last year, had sought the restriction.

Among the pet projects is one to help producers of genuine pork, in contrast to the Congressional variety. The bill includes \$1.8 million to conduct research in Iowa on “swine odor and manure management.”

The legislation includes \$173,000 for research on asparagus production in Washington State; \$206,000 for wool research in Montana, Texas and Wyoming; and \$209,000 for efforts to improve blueberry production in Georgia.

It also includes \$208,000 to control a weed known as cogongrass in Mississippi; \$1.2 million to control cormorants in Michigan, Mississippi, New York and Vermont; \$1 million to control Mormon crickets in Utah; and \$162,000 to control rodents in Hawaii.

Democrats also earmarked money for the presidential libraries of three Democrats: Franklin D. Roosevelt (\$17.5 million), John F. Kennedy (\$22 million) and Lyndon B. Johnson (\$2 million).

The bill even includes earmarks requested by some lawmakers who have left Congress, like Senator Pete V. Domenici, Republican of New Mexico, and Representative William J. Jefferson, Democrat of Louisiana.

House Republicans have been divided on the merits of earmarks. Some, like Mr. Flake and the minority leader, John A. Boehner of Ohio, do not request earmarks. But other Republicans, including many on the Appropriations Committee, do request such projects.

In the Republican response to Mr. Obama's speech on Tuesday night, Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana said Republicans lost the public's trust in recent years because they "went along with earmarks and big government spending in Washington."